IN THE BAY.

The sea-gulls whiten and dip,
Crying their lonely cry,
At noon in the blue of the bay;
And I hear the slow oars drip,
As the fisherman's boat drifts by,
And the cuckoo calls from the hillside far away.

The white birds cry for the foam,
Oh, white birds crying to me
The cry of my heart evermore,
By perilous seas to roam
To a shore far over the sea,
And I would that my ship went down within sight of the shore!

—Arthur Symons, in "Amoris Victima."

SOLVING THE DIFFICULTY.

"Any children?" queried Rose, gently.

He had just given her the interesting information that he was a widower, although so young—thirty-five at the outside.

"One," he admitted; and his dejected tone seemed to imply that that one was an unsatisfactory possession—not quite right in its head, perhaps, or disfigured with a harelip. "We had only been married a year, you know. She died when it was born."

"Ah-h!" breathed Rose, with soft intensity. She did not like to say more; and the womanly pity welling out to him in his misfortune was sufficiently expressed. Having consumed the after-dinner cigarette, in lulged in at her urgent bidding, he was at liberty to respond to it; they exhaled their sighs together. It was, in fact, a particularly sympathetic night—mild, still, solitary, with a beautiful moon. They sat out in it alone, tête-à-tête, on hammock chairs, free to sit thus till bedtime, while their host and hostess, her uncle and aunt, dozed over newspaper and knitting in the drawing-room behind them: the world forgetting, by the world forgot.

"Son or daughter?" Miss Lascelles asked, after a pause, not willing to break the thread of such an exquisite subject.

"A boy," said Mr. Bell, still with that unfatherly air of discontent. "Sometimes I wish it was a girl. She could look after me by and by; I could have her trained to be my housekeeper and sew my buttons on—that sort of thing, you know."

"You would have to wait a long time," said Rose. "Judging by- by your looks," she turned admiring eyes upon his very comely person, "it must be a perfect infant at present."

"Quite an infant; that is—let me see—fourteen months and a little over. Yes, it will be fifteen months on Thursday since he was born. And lost his mother two days after."

"Poor, poor little thing!" ejaculated Rose.

"Oh," laughed the young man, in an odd, mirthless way, "you needn't waste any pity on him, Miss Lascelles; he's all right. Rolls in fat—never ailed a thing in his life—might take the prize in a baby show. So they tell me. I haven't seen him myself for a good while."

"You haven't?" cried Rose, smilingly indignant. "Well, you are a nice sort of a parent, I must say! Don't you have him with you at home, then?"

"I haven't got a home. I gave it up when my poor girl died. What's the use of a home to me? I should never be there; my business takes me all over the country, and you can't leave a house and a young child to servants. The little time that I did try to carry on by myself they played the deuce with everything, child and all. One woman started feeding it with thick arrowroot. She'd have killed it, to a certainty."

"Yes, indeed. The idea! But it's incredible what some fools of women will do in the way of mismanaging a baby. I used to see a great deal of that when I was a district visitor."

"A mother of half a dozen, too," said Mr. Bell, reflectively, lighting another cigarette. "While a girl who'd never had any took to the job like a duck to water—knew just what to do and how to do it. I will say that for her."

"The instinct is in us all," remarked Miss Lascelles, dreamily, to the man in the moon, who seemed to survey the couple with his tongue in his cheek. "Or if not, it ought to be. I'm sure I could give many a mother points, as you call it."

"I've no doubt you could. I heard somebody say, the other day, that mothers are born, not made. Very true, too. You see it in the little girls nursing their dolls. I don't think anything of a she-child that doesn't want a doll as soon as it can speak."

"I always loved them," declared Rose.

He leaned forward to look at a spider's web that the silver light had just touched, making it shine out from its background of dark leaves and veranda post; and there was danger of rupture to the delicate thread of the topic that was weaving so charming a conversation. Wherefore the young lady hastened to inquire what had become of his little son.

"I suppose," she said, "he is with his mother's people?"

Slowly resuming his attitude of repose, Mr. Bell puffed awhile in silence, then answered: "No-o, not exactly. With a friend of his mother's, not her family. Unfortunately, her family is in England; so is mine. Neither of us had a soul here belonging to us. That was just the difficulty."

"It must have been a great difficulty," murmured Rose, in a feeling tone.

"I believe you," assented Mr. Bell, with emphasis. "In fact, it put me into the most ridiculous hole, the most confounded fix—one that I can't for the life of me see my way out of—one that——. However, I mustn't talk about it to you. It's not a thing that ought to be talked about to anybody."

And yet he yearned to talk about it, and now; and to this particularly sympathetic woman, who was not young and giddy, but, like himself, far out of her 'teens and experienced in the troubles of life, such as weighed him down. There was "something about her," he thought, that irresistibly appealed to him, and he did not know what; but an author, who knows everything, knows exactly what it was. It was the moonlight night.

A few words from her, backed by the nameless influences of the hour, loosened his tongue.

"You mustn't think me an unnatural parent," he said. "It's not that at all. I'm awfully fond of him. I've got his photograph in my pocket—I'll show it to you when we go in—the last one for the time being. I get a new one about once a month, in all sorts of get-ups, clothes and no clothes, but all as fat as butter, and grinning from ear to ear with the joy of life. You never saw such a fetching little cuss. I'd give anything to get hold of him—if I could."

"But, surely—his own father"——

"No. It sounds absurd to you, naturally; but that's because you don't understand the situation."

"I can't conceive of any situation"——

"Of course not. It's a preposterous situation. And I just drifted into it, I don't know how—oh, I do know—it was for the child's own sake; so that you really mustn't call me a heartless parent any more, Miss Lascelles. Nobody would do that who knew what I'd suffered for him!" Mr. Bell took the second cigarette from his mouth, and sighed deeply. "Even in the beginning it would have been difficult to get out of it, having once got in," he continued, after a pause; "but it has been going on so long, getting worse and worse every day and every hour, till now I'm tangled up and helpless, like that moth in that spider's web"—pointing to a little insect tragedy going on beside them.

Miss Lascelles leaned forward, resting her arms on her knees, and spreading her hands in the enchanting moonlight, which made them look white as pearls—and made her rather worn face look as if finely carved in ivory. It was a graceful, thoughtful, confidential pose, and her eyes, uplifted, gleamed just under his eyes, ineffably soft and kind.

"I'm so sorry!" she murmured. "But if I don't know what the trouble is——. Oh, don't tell me if you'd rather not! I can't help you, can I? I do wish I could!"

"So do I. But I'm afraid nobody can help me. And yet—perhaps a fresh eye—a woman's clearer insight"—— He paused, irresolute; then succumbed to temptation. "Look here, Miss Lascelles, I'll just tell you how it is, if you'll promise not to speak of it again. You are no gossip, I know—you will understand—and it will be such a blessed relief to tell somebody! And perhaps you could advise me, after all"——

"Let me try," she broke in, encouragingly. For an instant her pearly hand touched his sleeve. "You may trust me," she said.

"I'm sure of it, I'm sure of it," he responded, warmly. He flung away the remnant of the second cigarette, took a moment to collect himself, and plunged headlong.

"You see, we had nobody belonging to us in this country. I came out to make a living and a home for her—too crowded up in England—and as soon as I'd got a bit of steady income I sent for her to join me. Of course, we had to be married from somewhere, and some kind old people that I knew took her off the ship and looked after her for a day or two, and we drove to church from their house. Their daughter acted as bridesmaid, and she and my wife got to be great chums. She used to come and stay with us a good deal—it was lonesome for the poor girl in a strange land, and me so much away—and we used to put up with them when we went to town. In fact, they were what you might call bosom friends. That was just the difficulty."

"You are speaking," queried Rose gently, "of the person who has the baby?"

"Exactly. Ah, I see you begin to understand."

"I think so," said Rose, with a smile broad enough to be visible in any kind of moonlight. "But what was the difficulty?"

"Well, you know, being so really fond of her, and all that—wishing to do it for the sake of her dead friend; what could I say? Especially as those women were killing the unfortunate brat between them. She was not so very young, and was evidently clever at managing"——

"Yes," interposed Rose, smiling still.

"And peculiarly situated for undertaking the job—much as you are situated here—living with two old folks who doted on her and were only too pleased to let her do whatever she liked; fond of a baby, and in want of some object in life, and so on. But chiefly it was for Mabel's sake. To see poor Mabel's child messed and mauled about by a set of bungling, ignorant creatures, who had no interest whatever in it, was more than she could stand, she said; to tell the truth, I couldn't stand it either, and she begged me to let her have it to look after, as there was no female friend or relative nearer to it than she was. What could I do? She lived in a nice, healthy spot, and there was the old mother with her experience; and I was obliged to go away, and—and—well, I just had to say 'yes,' and be thankful to do it. We got the—the doctor found a—we engaged the sort of nurse that does everything, you know, a fine, strapping young woman, in the pink of condition; and away they went to Melbourne together. And at the first blush the worst of the trouble seemed over, instead of just beginning. I gave up my house and stored the furniture, and went off after my necessary business, miserable enough, as you may suppose, but at least with an easy mind about the boy. As far as he was concerned, as far as poor, dear Mabel was concerned, I felt that I had acted for the best. For the matter of that, looking at the business from their point of view, it appears even now that I did act for the best. Indeed, I don't for the life of me understand how any man could have acted otherwise under the circumstances."

The listener, listening intently, here put a quiet question—"Did you pay her?"—which caused the narrator to wince like a galled horse.

"Ah, there you hit the weak spot, Miss Lascelles, right in the bull's-eye," he declared, sighing furiously. "If I could have paid her, of course there'd have been no difficulty at all. But she wouldn't be paid."

"You ought to have insisted on it," said Rose severely.

"I did insist. I insisted all I knew. But she said it was a labor of love for her friend, and seemed so hurt at the idea of money being brought into the question that I was ashamed to press her beyond a certain point. She let me pay for the nurse's board, and that's all. The baby didn't eat anything, you see, and they were comfortably off, with lots of spare room in their house, and I just looked on it as a sort of temporary visit until we should be able to turn around a bit. But"—with another sigh—"he's there yet."

Miss Lascelles nodded, with an air of utter wisdom.

"Of course, you went often to see the child?"

"Whenever I was in town. And found him always the same, so beautifully cared for that, upon my soul, I never saw a baby in my life so sweet and clean and wholesome looking; jolly as a little sandboy all the time, too."

"That means that he had a perfect constitution, inherited from you, evidently. And you were fortunate in the nurse?"

"Very fortunate. But it appeared that beyond—beyond running the commissariat department, so to speak, she did next to nothing for him. Miss—the lady I spoke of—did everything. Made herself a perfect slave to him."

"Bought his clothes?"

"Oh," groaned the wretched man, "I suppose so. What did I know about a baby's clothes? And she wouldn't answer my questions—said he was all right and didn't want for anything, as I could see with my own eyes. I tried making presents, used to send game and things, found out her birthday and gave her a jewel, took every chance I could get to work off the obligation, but it was no use. She gave me a birthday present after I'd given her one.

"Well, if moths will go into spiders' webs," remarked his companion, "they must take the consequences."

"Sometimes they get helped out," he replied. "Some beneficent godlike being puts out an omnipotent finger"——

He looked at her and she looked at him. At this moment they seemed to have known one another intimately for years. The moon again.

"Tell me everything," she said, "and I'll help you out."

So then he told her that he had been giving up the habit of frequently visiting his son. Cowardly and weak, he knew, but the thing was too confoundedly awkward, too embarrassing altogether.

"But she writes. She writes a full report every week, tells me what he weighs and when he's got a fresh tooth and how he crawls about the carpet and into her bed of a morning, and imitates the cat mewing, and drinks I don't know how many pints of new milk a day, and all that sort of thing. I believe the rascal has the appetite of a young tiger, and yet I can't pay for what he eats! The nurse was long ago dispensed with, so that I've not even her board to send a check for, that they might by chance make a trifle of profit out of. It seems too late now to simply take the child away, and there leave it; I haven't the unspeakable shabbiness, the brazen impudence, the mean selfishness, to do such a thing; and, besides, he might come to any sort of grief, poor little chap, in that case. There's no doubt in the world that her taking of him and doing for him have been the salvation of his health, and perhaps his life. And I know, by what she tells me, that he regularly dotes on her—as so he ought—and would howl his very head off if we took him from her. What could I do with him if I did take him? I've no home, and nobody to look after it if I had, and hired servants are the deuce with a lone man at their mercy. It would be worse now than it was at first. And so"—with a heavy sigh—"you see the situation. I'm just swallowed up body and bones, drowned fathoms deep, in a sea of debt and obligation that I can never by any possibility struggle out of, except"——

He paused and blushed.

"Except," continued Rose, with the candid air of a kind and sensible sister, "except by marrying her, you mean? Yes, I see the situation. I appreciate your point of view. I should understand if it were not that she unquestionably laid the trap for you deliberately—just as that spider laid his for moths and flies. And marriage by capture has gone out."

"Oh, don't say that!" the man protested in haste. "I would not for a moment accuse her of that. She was Mabel's friend—it was for her—it was out of pure womanly compassion for the motherless child, at any rate, in the beginning. And even now I have no right whatever to suppose"——

"But you know it, all the same. Every word you have said to me tells me that you know it. You may as well be frank."

He squirmed a little in his chair, but confessed as required.

"Well—but it's a caddish thing to say—I think she does expect it. And hasn't she the right to expect it? However, that's neither here nor there. The point is, that in common honor and honesty, in common manliness, I should repay her if I can; and there's no other way—at least, I can't see any other way. It is my fault, and not hers, that I don't take to the notion, for a better woman never walked, nor one that would make a better mother to the boy. But, somehow, you do like to have your free choice, don't you?"

"And ought to have it," quoth Rose, with energy. "And must have it, and shall. Now listen, Mr. Bell"—addressing him in such a tone of confidence and encouragement that he felt sure she was going to cut his bonds forthwith—"you have asked me to help you, and I can help you. It will be perfectly easy, situated as I am here. He will not miss her after a couple of days, and she has really no earthly right either to him or to you, and it would give me the greatest pleasure you can imagine. This is what you must do"—she leaned forward in her chair and gazed earnestly into his paling face, "you must just hand that baby over to me."—(Longman's Magazine.

CONSIDERATE.

"YOU ARE A SELFISH OLD MAN, PAPA; YOU NEVER TELL ME I WANT A NEW HAT, OR THAT MY DRESS LOOKS SHABBY."
"NO, MY DEAR. I DON'T LIKE TO BE SO PERSONAL."—Sketch.